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Father Janssens, Led Jesuits for 18 Years

Special to the Herald Tribune
VATICAN CITY.

The very Rev. John Baptiste Janssens, 74, leader of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) for 18 years, died at the Jesuit headquarters yesterday 12 minutes after Pope Paul VI had visited him and given him a special blessing.

Father Janssens, a Belgian, was the 27th superior general of Roman Catholicism's largest religious order. He suffered a stroke which partly paralyzed him Wednesday and his condition worsened yesterday as heart and lung complications set in.

Upon his death, the Rev. John L. Swain, a Canadian, became acting head of the society until representatives of Jesuit provinces from throughout the world can meet to elect a new father general. Father Swain served as Vicar of Father Janssens for some years.

The Jesuits grew from about 28,000 to 36,000 under his leadership. Its members staff many U. S. Catholic educational establishments, including Fordham University, New York; Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wis., and Loyola University, Chicago.

FOILED GESTAPO

Father Janssens was an austere man noted for his administrative abilities but he had a talent also for misdirection which outwitted the Gestapo time and again when his Belgium was occupied by the Nazis during World War II.

He was head of the Jesuits in the Flemish part of the country during those years. Hidden in his office was a large atlas on which he pinpointed Allied advances. He knew much about the Belgian underground. When German agents called at the big Jesuit House in the center of Brussels, they learned nothing, departed bewildered.

"You should have seen him when the Gestapo came here," one of his associates said after the war. "The dignity of his reception, and how he managed to show

them to go, but nowhere else. Since many of our members were joining the under-

ground action, he knew many dangerous secrets but never did the Gestapo find any."

Father Janssens was born in Malines, Belgium, on Dec. 22, 1889. He studied at Louvain University and at the Gregorian University in Rome. In 1920, a year after his ordination, he was sent to Istanbul to work among the White Russians who escaped from the Bolshevik revolution. He learned to speak Russian during his stay.

He returned to Louvain in 1923 and taught canon law there until he became head of the Jesuit institute at the university in 1929. He never thought much of his ability in the Russian language but

considered himself fluent in Flemish, French, German, Italian and Latin. He admitted to a "passable knowledge" of English and Spanish.

ELECTED

Father Janssens was elected Superior General of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) on Sept. 15, 1946. The election was held in Rome at a meeting of 164 delegates from all parts of the world. He succeeded the Very Rev. Vladimir Ledochowsky, of Poland, who died in 1942 after ruling the order for 27 years.

The Jesuit order was founded in 1540 by Ignatius Loyola, a Spanish soldier who was later canonized. Primary aim of the order was to be at the call of the Pope for whatever work might be required. It was suppressed in 1773 under pressure from European kings who complained that the Jesuits disturbed the public peace. It was restored in 1814.

As the leader of the group, Father Janssens exercised what amounted to military powers of command over some 36,000 members, about 20 per cent of whom are American citizens.

In August 1949, he was named, along with Allen W.

Dulles and Cardinal Spellman as one of the key figures in a secret "Organization X,"

alleged to have been plotting against Soviet-bloc countries. The accusation, voiced by a Communist newspaper in Czechoslovakia, talked of "the Vatican espionage service, which is directed by the General of the Jesuit order, Janssens." Neither he nor the Vatican dignified the charge with a reply.

Father Janssens suffered for many years from cataracts and asthma. Finally, he lost the sight of one eye. He accepted, grudgingly, the necessity for a Vicar General to help him but continued to work unsparingly at the many tasks imposed by his position in the society.



Associated Press

Jean Baptiste Janssens